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# Glittery Pitchers in Viking Homes

## Exploring Sensory Aspects of Tating Pottery

When daydreaming of life in the Viking Age, most people probably do not give a second thought to something as mundane as ceramic vessels for storing, preparing and serving food. Now, imagine a pitcher, carefully turned on the potter's wheel, shaping the finest clay into a bold design, after which the dark surface was burnished to a shine. After firing, on top this smooth, glossy surface, the artisan has applied tight rows of triangles and strips cut out of tin foil, which were then polished to reflect light like a mirror. If that sounds outlandish, it's because it was – here was a vessel purposely made to catch the eye, as one the most visually striking utensils in Viking halls and townhouses.

By contrast to most people, archaeologists never fail to get excited by this “Tating ware”, named after an early find spot of the pottery type. To us, a team of archaeologists digging in the trading town of Ribe, the discovery of small fragments of Tating ware embedded in dirt layers between the subsequent clay floors of a house as well as larger, joining sherds in the rubbish deposits outside was a significant moment [1]. The dark-coloured, fine-grained fabric, often with the remains of adhesive in the shape of the original decoration, is easy to recognize, especially on north European sites where such high-quality, wheel-turned pottery is uncommon.

Field archaeology, by its very nature, is a highly sensory process: soil and archaeological objects are routinely interpreted through vision, touch and even smell. However, once it comes to analysis, we archaeologists rarely consider these sensory aspects as anything other than shortcuts to classification and typology. Despite a recent “sensory turn” in archaeology (Hurcombe 2007; Hamilakis 2013; Skeates and Day 2019), archaeologists are not usually trained to consider our principal source of evidence – material remains of the past – from a sensory perspective. Instead, we typically proceed in a decidedly objectivist manner, the empirically observed physical attributes of artefacts providing the criteria for classification, quantification, mapping, and further interpretation. In our case too, it was the analytical implications of our sensorial identification of Tating ware that enflamed our enthusiasm: clearly, the former occupants of our excavation site had privileged access to prestigious merchandise, circulating in the long-distance maritime trading network of the early Viking Age.

Using such supposedly objective traits, archaeologists define Tating ware in a twofold way: by its tin foil decoration, and by the typical pitcher shape. Importantly, these two criteria do not always coincide. Shapes cut out of tin foil were applied to a range of burnished wares found mainly in the North Sea region in the second half of the

8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> century (the “western” group, see Giertz 2014, 221–27). Conversely, such pitchers sometimes remained undecorated, or were decorated using different techniques.

The specific form-type and decorative technique combine to form the “classic” Tating pitcher [3-4], dated between c. 800 and the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. It occurs throughout the North Sea and Baltic region, although it is best known from north European sites. This includes major trading settlements as well as elite burials, of which the Birka (Sweden) finds are the most famous examples. The decorated pitcher can be seen as a standardized product crystallizing out of the earlier diversity of the “western” group, in terms of its singular form as well as its consistent decorative scheme of tight, horizontal registers densely covering the entire upper part of the pitcher’s body. Scientific and archaeological analysis suggests that the majority of Tating pitchers were produced at a single production site, likely in the German Rhineland (Stilke, Heine, and Mommsen 1996; Giertz 2014).

The deployment of the usual archaeological toolset – typological classification, distribution mapping, scientific provenancing – has resulted in interpretations pertaining to economy and status. Thus, the classic pitcher has become a marker of a site’s centrality and an iconic representative of Viking Age material culture, looming large in discussions on long-distance trade and the adoption of continental wine-drinking practices (e.g. Brather 1996; Sindbæk 2007). In addition, the presence of tin foil crosses on the lower body of some of the pitchers has been discussed from the perspective of Christianization (e.g. Staecker 2003).

Even if we take a moment more to appreciate the appearance and touch of these sherds today, our observations would do little justice to perceptions – indeed, experiences – in the past. The vessels are fragmented beyond repair, their burnished surfaces tarnished, and the bright shine of polished tin foil has been lost to corrosion and wear. Furthermore, we typically handle them in unfavourable conditions in the field, or in the practical, clinically-lit surroundings of a post-excavation lab or

museum storeroom [2]. How, then, could an archaeologist hope to capture the original impact and significance of an artefact, beyond the physical, technical, economic?

### **A pitcher without parallel?**

The answer to this question does not just reside in how an object looked or felt. How things like ceramic vessels are experienced is not inherent to them. It arises from physical affordances (in this case, to store and pour fluids) and sensory experience, but, importantly, also from its context. In order to see Tating ware through the “period eye” (Baxandall 1972), we need to understand the perceived associations with previously encountered objects and ideas (e.g. Jones 2007).

Strikingly, as far as we can tell, Tating pitchers embody only few clear references that could have been observed and understood by contemporaries. The characteristic pitcher form probably stems from earlier pottery produced in the German Rhineland, but has few obvious, contemporary relations. With the exception of the crosses applied to some pitchers, the tin-foil motifs applied to the pitchers belong largely to the decorative realm, devoid of clear symbolism. Some similarities are found in the much smaller decorative patterns found on rare gold foil-decorated glass drinking vessels, sherds of which have been found in Ribe and other high-status and trading settlements in western and northern Europe (e.g. Lund Feveile 2006, 225–27, 277).

The vertical tin-foil stripes on the neck of many pitchers as well as the less common lattice motifs may derive from the inconspicuous burnished line patterns found on 8<sup>th</sup>- and 9<sup>th</sup>-century pottery produced in the Eifel region and elsewhere (e.g. Redknap 1984, 403). The elongated triangles that are found on some pitchers around the neck and in registers further down could derive from decorative *Pressblech* mounts reinforcing the openings of wooden buckets and drinking horns, found in 6<sup>th</sup>- and 7<sup>th</sup>-century high-status burials on the continent and in England (Stone 1961; Vallée 2016). However, such continental comparanda would not have been widely available in 9<sup>th</sup>-century northern Europe.



**[1]** A handful of well-preserved tin foil-decorated sherds as they emerged from the soil of Viking-Age Ribe. Sydvestjyske Museer/Northern Emporium, with permission.



**[2]** Sherds of Tating ware in the finds lab. Sydvestjyske Museer, CC-BY.

Put simply, to north Europeans the Tating pitcher must have stood out as, for the most part, distinctly unique. To its unusual, but standardized form and decoration, we can add its status as the prized product of craft techniques largely unknown in the north at the time. Combined, these elements placed the Tating pitcher in a category on its own amongst contemporary material culture.

Curiously, there is one exception to this conclusion (Selling 1951, 287-288). The oblong diamonds set in closely-spaced rows on many Tating pitchers seem absent from the western Tating group, but are commonly found on Scandinavian pottery decorated with geometric stamp impressions [5]. In two such vessels – from Øsløs in northern Jutland and Prästbol in Sweden – the stamped motifs are organized in tight horizontal registers that immediately remind of Tating pitchers. Are these stamped vessels imitations (at odds with their supposed 6<sup>th</sup>- to 8<sup>th</sup>-century date) or inspirations (implying an unparalleled influence of Scandinavian design on

continental production)? Either way, amongst northern European aristocrats, Øsløs-type stamped vessels could well have formed an important associative reference for Tating pitchers. Like the latter, they are found in high-status burials in southern Scandinavia, suggesting that they embodied similar practices and values.

### **Sensory experience in context**

Their nearly unique appearance means that exploring the practical and sensory experiences relating to Tating pitchers is not just an interesting thought experiment, but our only recourse to more fully grasp its contemporary significance. This is easier said than done, however. We can attempt to reconstruct the appearance of now-broken and degraded objects, and recreate – at least in our minds – the settings in which they might have been used. We can also assume that the physical and neurological processes underlying sensory perception in humans did not change much over the past millennium. However, the



**[3]** Tating pitchers from Birka (Sweden): burial Bj551 (left); burial Bj597 (right). Svenska Historiska Museet, CC-BY.

cognitive appreciation of perception is much less accessible, especially for past societies with few or no written records. We can describe the look and feel of tin foil-decorated pitchers, but what value or importance was attached to these?

Patterns and contextualisation offer avenues forward. What sensory aspects would have drawn most attention, within the framework of the past material world? The haptic contrast between the texture and thermal conductivity of burnished pottery and polished metal are obvious and set Tating pitchers apart from other artefacts in the same sphere of preparing, serving and consuming drinks, ranging from coarser wooden and ceramic utensils to prestigious metal vessels and glass cups. However, it is the pitchers' striking visual appearance that would have been the predominant sensation.

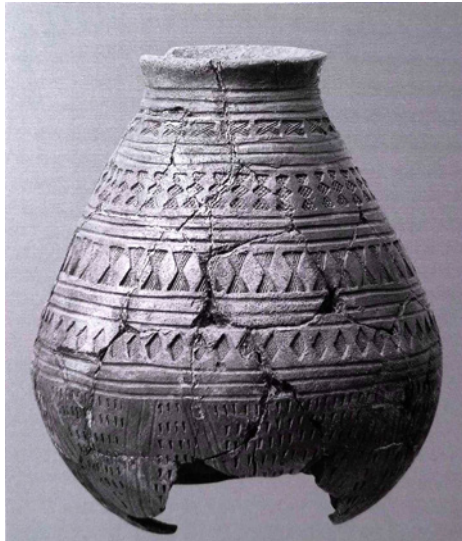
Other materials, not least glass and polished metal, might have reflected the light and attracted the eye as well, but the contrast between reflective shapes of tin foil alter-

nating with the dark-coloured, slightly shiny pottery surface makes Tating ware unique. Contrary to most Viking art, the geometric patterns were not meant to evoke narrative or symbolic meaning or even to be considered closely; rather, they served to provide shiny reflections and contrast **[4]**. Combined with the evident function of the pitcher, this brings us close to its most impactful use: in hospitality practices involving the ostentatious serving of beverages (most likely wine), set in halls and houses lit by fireplaces, candles and lamps.

Hospitality and commensality were crucial parts of the "ritualized drama of aristocratic hall culture" (Thomas and Scull 2021). The discovery of two partial, shattered Tating pitchers in the great magnate's hall of Borg in Lofoten exemplifies this (Holand 2003, 203). Other types of objects found at Borg, including a copper alloy bowl and glass drinking vessels, may also have been involved in practices of aristocratic hospitality (Pettersen 2020). Several scholars have indeed contended that tin foil-







[5] Inspiration or imitation? Stamped vessels from Øsløs in Denmark (left) and Prästbol in Sweden (right), featuring a decorative scheme very similar to that found on Tating pitchers (Pedersen 2014, 2.16; Selling 1951, fig. 7).

decorated pitchers, as prestigious imports found in several high-status settlements, should be considered luxury tableware of the elite (e.g. Brather 1996). However, such arguments usually do not fully encompass how this use relates to the specific sensory impact of Tating ware.

In her thoughtful exploration of “the multisensory materiality of (Anglo-Saxon) ornamented metalwork”, art historian Melanie Herman paints a lively and poignant picture of a feast in an Anglo-Saxon timber hall. As she envisions, amid the smoke and rumour, those present are afforded flashes of fire-light reflecting off a gold brooch, carried on the chest by a woman moving around the hall, pouring drinks (Herman 2018, 112–13). The description

echoes those found in the early medieval epic *Beowulf*, notably of queen Wealhtheow as she waited on the hero and his band during a banquet: “So the Helming woman went on her rounds,/ queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,/ offering the goblet to all ranks” (*Beowulf*, 620–622). In the same way as the brooch, the numerous small reflective surfaces of a tin foil-decorated pitcher must have glittered in the flickering fire-light, calling attention to the highly charged act of dispensing beverages to the magnate’s guests and retainers. Elsewhere, we read how decorative materials in the hall also drew attention by reflecting the light: “Gold thread shone/in the wall-hangings, woven scenes that attracted and held the eye’s attention” (*Beowulf*, 993–995).

In urban and merchant communities, hospitality and communal drinking were undoubtedly just as important as amongst the warrior aristocracy. The find at the trading site of Hamwic (Southampton) of tin foil-decorated sherds amongst other remains of recurring feasts, dumped

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[4] Reconstruction of the Tating pitcher from Bj597. Archäologisches Museum Hamburg, with permission, photo: Torsten Weise.

in a refuse pit, is strongly supportive of this (Jervis 2011). In Ribe, we identified sherds of at least eleven distinct pitchers, associated with three or four different households in the period c. AD 820-860 (Deckers forthcoming). Combined with other evidence, this points to a relatively common use of Tating ware in Viking-Age towns.

The unique design and sparkling appearance of the Tating pitcher formed its most meaningful features, rendering it instantly recognizable and turning the pitcher itself into a broadly understood sign. This status perhaps contributed to both its standardization and its wide distribution, from southern England to northern Norway and the eastern Baltic: across this wide area, travelling merchants in particular would have seen the Tating pitcher as an index for the hospitality upon which they and the trading network at large relied. The pitcher could have held a similar meaning in aristocratic culture in northern Europe, explaining the inclusion of Tating pitchers in high-status female burials in Birka and in southern Scandinavia as references to the leading role of these women in the ritualized reception of guests.

Several scholars attach great importance to the cross shapes applied to some pitchers, as evidence for a close link with Christian beliefs, liturgical practice and missionary activity (e.g. Staecker 2003, 466–67; Mikkelsen 2019, 50–52). The central significance to Christian liturgy of serving and consuming wine is obvious. Given the above argument, and keeping in mind the role of magnates as cult leaders in pre-Christian Scandinavia, the Tating pitcher might have been a natural choice for use in early Christian liturgy in northern Europe. However, it bears pointing out that this link with Christian practice is ill-substantiated, and in the interpretation proposed above, the crosses need not have been particularly salient symbols. Just as likely – perhaps depending on context – they were only secondary to the associations evoked by the pitcher as a whole.

### **Putting the senses first**

Scholars have put forward a range of interpretations for the significance of Tating pitchers in northern Europe. Few have considered their literally meaningless decoration and glittering, almost garish visuality at face value, but for contemporaries, this would have been the primary effect of their appearance. It drew attention to the acts performed with the pitcher, accentuating the value of the object as at once a crucial element in and signifier for the fundamental social ritual of hospitality – regardless of whether one was visiting a magnate's hall or the home of a tradesman at one of the major trading towns. Evidently, the thorough, analytical gaze of the detached scholar sometimes overlooks the blindingly obvious. As this closer look at Tating ware reveals, awarding a more central place to the senses in the interpretation of material culture not just helps to envision past human experience in more accurate ways: it can be an indispensable tool in elucidating the very essence of the appearance, use and meaning of archaeological artefacts.

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